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ABSTRACT

At Florida State University in Tallahassee, 30 students a year are enrolled in the public relations major, beginning with the junior year, so that at any one time there are approximately 60 majors, all of whom have at least a B average. The basic course--PUR 3000, Introduction to Public Relations--enrolls over 150 students a semester in two sections. This course is regarded as a liberal arts service course for the entire university. Only a little over 10% of the students in this class are enrolled in the public relations major, or want to enroll in it. Other students are from such majors as business, fashion merchandising, theatre, and English. Historical, philosophical, and ethical aspects of public relations are stressed rather than practical aspects of public relations. Just before or after students complete their required internship, they may take PUR 4600, Public Relations Management. This course covers areas such as budgeting, time management, crisis public relations, and issues management; provides students with the chance to explore their potential careers; and gives them a head start toward advancing through the ranks in public relations. (DF)

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Two Courses in Public Relations

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CS 504 940

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By Gregg Phifer, FSU, and
Gerry Gee, FAMU

Two Courses in Public Relations

I appreciate deeply the opportunity to follow these three thoughtful presentations concerning public relations education. I also want to express my gratitude to Ethel Glenn, who did the planning for this series, for an opportunity to read the three papers in our symposium before preparing the final draft of my own.

Perhaps I should confess from the first that I came to public relations late in my professional career. Ten years ago I had yet to teach my first course with the PUR prefix. I was acting chairman of Speech Communication at the time and deeply concerned that we have a professional outlet for our students besides teaching--and, of course, in addition to the broad liberal education that has always been a hallmark of our profession. We had then and have now many excellent service courses that would profit any student in our University: public speaking, oral interpretation, and the newer nonverbal and interpersonal communication courses coming into vogue.

So in my administrative position I looked to public relations as one answer to my search. Back in the fifties my colleagues and I put public relations into our catalogue copy as one outlet for the major in our Department of Speech. So this has been in our thinking for a long, long time. I can personally empathize with the suggestion that public relations education often finds a sympathetic and profitable home in departments of speech communication.

As I listened to the first presentation I was struck again by how different our situations can be. No single course concept can possibly fit all our varying needs. At Florida State, for example, we enroll thirty students in the public relations major each year--starting with the junior year when students transfer out of basic studies or to Florida State from one of our many community colleges. At any one time we serve about sixty majors in public relations, give or take a few. Ours is a limited enrollment major; all students have a B average or better.

Last fall our basic course, PUR 3000, Introduction to Public Relations, enrolled over 150 students in two sections. Of these about twenty either had been admitted to the public relations major or wanted to apply. A little over ten percent of the students in this course either major in PR or want to. A somewhat larger group majors in some other aspect of communication like advertising, communication for business, or political communication.

Most of the students in our basic course are from outside the College. We get quite a few from business, fashion merchandising, and theatre--the business side, not performance. The rest come from all parts of the University. English majors who like to write begin to wonder what they will do for a living and take our course to find out if this would be a possibility.

Our introductory course is therefore not just for majors; in fact, most of our students are clearly not majoring in public relations. We have no prerequisite for the course; it is regarded as one of our introductory courses, paralleling introductory courses in advertising, mass communication, film, or interpersonal communication.

In the best of all academic worlds, I suppose we would run a separate section for majors, but in the real world of FTE this is an impossible luxury. Our

ccurse must do double duty, as an introductory course for those majoring or minoring in public relations and as a service course for other majors in the College of Communication and all other parts of our University.

I think, after having taught the course for several years, that I prefer it this way. I see our basic course as a liberal arts introduction to the field of public relations and its significance in our society. It is not a professional course though possibly a pre-professional one. I don't shy away from calling ours a course about PR rather than a course in PR.

I brought along copies of our syllabus so that you can understand more fully what we do. The first four objectives illustrate my point about this being a liberal arts introduction to the field. After completing the course, students should:

1. know something about the history of persuasive communication efforts in the history of our nation and see current efforts at public relations as a natural outgrowth of that history.
2. understand the essential functions of public relations in our society. See its relationships to advertising, journalism, management, graphics, the mass media, public speaking and speechwriting, interpersonal communication, persuasion, sociology and social psychology, survey research techniques.
3. appreciate the many publics with which practitioners must be concerned.
4. recognize some of the many tools used by public relations practitioners in reaching these many publics.

I look at our introductory course as a good testing ground for those who think they want to major in public relations. Even though we start with bright students--remember that B average requirement--some will find that PR is not for them, that as they learn what public relations professionals do, they are turned off by its requirements and do not want to dedicate their lives to the profession. This, I tell them, is an important part of their education and it costs only one three-credit course to find out.

On the other hand, all public relations majors and would-be majors are required to do a short 3,000-word term paper as part of the course requirements. This paper is optional for all non-majors and is elected by only a few, as you can well imagine. But through this paper I have an opportunity to find out if prospective majors can write a decent paper. If the answer is no, I tell them to find another major, perhaps an easy one in organic chemistry or computer programming.

To help majors decide if the field is for them, we invite to our first course a half dozen professionals from the Tallahassee area. Since Tallahassee is Florida's capital city, we have no trouble bringing in professionals working in state government, doing "public information," if you please. Since most associations have headquarters buildings here in Tallahassee, we can draw upon the many professionals working for the Florida Bar, the Podiatry Association--and don't tell me you don't know what that is--or the Municipal Utilities Association. We have two Universities in Tallahassee, my own and historically black Florida A. and M. University. PR for higher education and sports information offer no problem at all.

On the other hand, corporate PR offers a bit of a problem. The closest we can come right now is Centel or the Hospital Corporation of America, which operates a for-profit hospital in our city. Now if we were in Atlanta or even Jacksonville, we would have a much easier time with corporate PR. But if students complete our introductory course without knowing what PR professionals do, they have slept through or chosen to cut important sessions.

We use Cutlip and Center as a text, now in its sixth edition with the addition of a third author, Glen Broom of San Diego State. For non-majors that text is a bit much. But since it is the basis for accrediting examinations by both FPRA--Florida Public Relations Association--and PRSA--Public Relations Society of America--we will probably continue to use it until those associations change their policy with respect to accreditation.

In my own teaching of the course I stress the historical, philosophical, and ethical chapters by comparison with the more practical how-to chapters. This is part of my basic philosophy for the course as an introduction to PR in our society and as a service course for other parts of the College and of the University.

Majors in public relations follow this basic course with courses in methods, case studies, and a required semester-long internship. Most of our students get additional writing experience in the English Department's Article and Essay Workshop, in the basic newswriting course taught at A. and M. University, or in writing for our College newspaper, Smoke Signals. As I read the current accrediting requirements of the only agency now in the business, AEJMC, we are pretty much in line with their professional and liberal arts requirements. We also require Interpersonal Communication, Public Speaking, and a course in Speechwriting. Our 40-semester-hour major may be completed with such electives as Photography, Communication for Organizing, Political Communication and Campaigning.

We require a minor outside the College of Communication. Most elect Marketing in our College of Business. Others choose Journalism, Psychology, Art, Religion, or any other minor related to the type of PR in which they may be interested. We are permissive in the choice of a minor.

It seems obvious as I look around our section of the country that the journalistic monopoly on preparation of PR professionals is going if not yet over. The green-eyeshade people have had their day, but public relations education is much more than the print and/or electronic media.

PUR 4600, Our Management Course

Over the past several years Professor Gerald Gee, who heads the PR sequence at Florida A. and M. University, has worked with me in developing a capstone course for PR majors, PUR 4600, Public Relations Management. This is designed to be taken just before or after students complete their required internship, often in the semester of graduation. It is not yet required, but is highly advised and we probably get two-thirds or more of our majors in the course.

In the Syllabus for the course we state that it "presumes a high level of knowledge about public relations. . ." Students will normally have completed

the Intro course, Methods, and Case Studies. Some field experience--on a paid or voluntary basis--is desired but not a prerequisite. The course is designed so that students will:

1. learn about general and specific aspects of management;
2. develop and refine their skills in problem solving;
3. integrate what they have learned about PR from other courses and experience in the field;
4. demonstrate their understanding of PR as a management function, and
5. assemble (if they have not already done so) a professional portfolio in preparation for employment after college or (if they already have a portfolio) create a personal "credo" on PR management.

I have with me a Syllabus and course outline for PUR 4600 as well as our PUR 3000, the Intro course. You are welcome to see what we do; it might or might not be useful in your own program. We adopted Public Relations Management By Objectives by Norman R. Nager and T. Harrell Allen as a text. It has been useful but I hold no particular brief for this text. If a new and better one appears, we will probably shift.

Working with this course is for me an overload, so Gerry Gee really takes the lead in making plans for teaching the course. He does the units on planning, on the choice of goals and objectives, on research and evaluation, on more general management theory. He has what I consider a strong unit on budgeting. I have been responsible for the units on time management, crisis PR, and issues management.

Whereas our introductory public relations course is a service course with a broad liberal arts approach to the field, our public relations management course really zeroes in on professional concerns. We cover not only those factors which our students must know as they begin their careers in public relations but also those things that will help them later become successful managers in this field. What we attempt to do in this course is give our students an opportunity to explore their potential futures and a head start toward advancing through the ranks in public relations.

For example, we emphasize in this course both "systems thinking" and "management by objectives," approaches used and understood by middle- and upper-middle-level managers of public and private sector agencies and organizations. We put into a larger context the public relations process that our majors have learned about in their other courses. We help them apply general management theories to their specific interests in public relations.

After sessions in which we discuss the various types and styles of management, we spend four full class periods on how sound planning is done and why that is so important. Students are given several exercises to help them develop well-stated goals and objectives and design well-structured plans. They also learn about the process of managing research activities in public relations and how to incorporate evaluation methods in the budgets of the plans and proposals they will write for their eventual employers or clients.

In our introductory course I usually have a session--sometimes two--on PR crises. I have used Metropolitan Edison and the Three Mile Island nuclear crisis as a case study, but the Firestone Radial 500s or the Mt. St. Helens eruption would serve equally well as serious PR disasters. So would Hooker

Chemical and the Love Canal, now a synonym for disastrous dumping of chemicals. If time permits, I may discuss Johnson and Johnson and the way they responded to the Tylenol deaths as an example of a crisis well handled. Union Carbide faced serious problems in West Virginia--including public relations problems--after their disaster in Bhopal, India.

In our Management course my emphasis is on preparing for and handling the nearly inevitable crisis situations. If any PR professional hopes to escape crises, he or she should think again. Even sports PR--to take one particular example--is far from immune. Years ago our own coach, Larry Jones, had his chickenwire scandal when linemen worked out under chickenwire to force them to keep low. Or take our neighboring University of Florida and its NCAA probation right now.

As we tell our students in PR Management, the question is not whether but when the crisis will come. Preparedness is the watchword. Who is to be the spokesperson? How can the PR manager build confidence in his or her integrity with media representatives? In time of crisis this is an indispensable asset. One first law of crisis PR is to get the story out, get the whole story out, and get it out fast. A one-day headline sensation is easier to live down than one that drags out over days and weeks as new revelations fuel media fires and keep the disaster in newspaper headlines and on TV news programs.

In the introductory course I usually give one lecture on corporate advertising and mention corporate advocacy, corporate image building, and corporate economic education. The last-named is usually a disaster area and a waste of funds telling people how great our economic system really is. But the others have important accomplishments to cite.

In the Management course I give illustrations of corporate image building and the contribution that may make to the company as a whole, including its bottom line. I also discuss some of the successes and failures--and some of the on-going problems of corporate advocacy, or issues management. I use Burlington Northern and its fight against the coal-slurry pipeline and Bethlehem Steel and its insistence on application of the trigger price mechanism to combat dumping of foreign steel on the American market below production costs. I also warn that if the biggest corporation of them all, AT&T, could not ward off divestiture, then we need to be aware of the possibilities for failure as well as success of issues management.

That should be enough to give you a little of the flavor of what we try to do in this capstone course for our program in public relations at the Florida State University. As I have said, what we do may or may not fit your particular situation. The same of course is true of our approach to the introductory course in public relations. The fact that we regard it as a liberal arts service course for the entire University does not mean that you will find it desirable to do the same. You may want to do--you may need to do--something quite different from our approach. We all try to do the best we can with what we have to work with and for the students whom we serve.

Thank you for listening to my discussion of our efforts at Florida State. I have enjoyed preparing this paper. It often helps clarify one's own thinking to be forced to put ideas on paper for presentation to one's professional colleagues. I hope that my associates on this panel agree that we have learned as much or more as anyone listening to this symposium. --30--

Abstract: Two Courses in Public Relations

No two programs of public relations education serve the same constituencies or function in the same academic environment. At Florida State University our program is limited to thirty students a year and requires for several courses the cooperation of the School of Journalism and Media at historically-black Florida A. and M. University a mile away on another Tallahassee hill.

Our introductory course serves three hundred students a year, only a handful of them PR majors. Students include those majoring in some other communication area and in business, fashion merchandising, theatre, English, and other parts of the University. PUR 3000 emphasizes the role of PR in our society much more than how to do PR. It begins with history, ends with ethics, and covers most of Cutlip, Center, and Broom in between.

When PR majors have finished Publication Editing and Design, PR Methods, and PR Case Studies, they enroll in PR Management, a capstone course to prepare them for both the required internship and the world outside our ivory tower.

PUR 4600 covers such professional concerns as systems thinking and management by objectives--concepts familiar to managers of both public and private agencies and organizations. We deal with time management, crisis management, issues management, budget management, and research management.

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